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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Soroptimist International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

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Statement

With a name like "Soroptimist" it should not be surprising that we, who are representing 90,000 women and girls in 124 countries, are hopeful; hopeful that we truly are on the precipice of a global paradigm shift. The world is waking to the realization that sustainable development must be the cornerstone of international policy setting, and that genuine sustainable development means economic and ecological equality. Soroptimist International, as a global voice for women, calls upon civil society, Governments and the private sector to ensure that this paradigm shift becomes a reality, and not just another point on the ever-growing list of unrealized international commitments.

With so many international meetings, policy-setting forums and conferences focusing on preparations for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), we must vigilantly and steadfastly ensure that the role of women and girls, above all rural women and girls, is at the heart of these debates and decisions.

> Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development (principle 20 of the 1992 Rio Declaration).
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> Women now represent 40 per cent of the global labour force, 43 per cent of the world's agricultural labour force, and more than half the world's university students. Productivity will be raised if their skills and talents are used more fully. For example, if women farmers were to have the same access as men to fertilizers and other inputs, maize yields would increase by almost one sixth in Malawi and Ghana and barriers that discriminate against women working in certain sectors or occupations would be eliminated (statement made at the Open Forum on Gender during the 2011 Policy Forum at the annual World Bank and International Monetary Fund meetings, reported by the representative of Soroptimist International).
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> Investing in small-scale farming, particularly through women, is a vital step towards meeting the challenges of food production in the future. Governments are not living up to their international commitment to protect women from discrimination, as the gap between de jure and de facto discrimination persists. Rural women still find it more difficult to get access to a range of resources such as credit, land, agricultural inputs and extensions, with obvious consequences for their food security. Land ownership is a particular issue for women (excerpt from statement given on International Women's Day at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in 2011, by a representative of Soroptimist International).

Soroptimist International demands that Governments commit to the education, empowerment and enabling of those most affected by ecological and economic degradation and destruction, namely, rural women and girls, to meaningfully participate in decision-making and policy-setting for the achievement of sustainable development at local, national and international levels. The Soroptimist International model of educating women and girls by increasing access to skills, empowering women and girls with increased confidence and enabling opportunities in the wider community to ensure they have choices has proven to be most effective in the context of rural women's needs and sustainable development.

With this in mind, Soroptimist International brings the following recommendations to the participants of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, based on first-hand knowledge and experience from our worldwide network of grass-roots, community-based clubs in both the global North and the global South. These recommendations are grouped into three categories. First, we provide our recommendations based on our work in action, advocacy and awareness-raising to empower rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges. Second, we note with interest that many of the recommendations that we made for the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, in the context of access to education, are still relevant in the context of rural women. We have reiterated these recommendations specifically towards rural women. Finally, we have included relevant excerpts from the Women's Major Stakeholder Group for the Earth Summit 2012 (Rio+20), in which Soroptimist International is an active participant. These recommendations are critical to this year's priority theme of the Commission on the Status of Women, and we believe they warrant attention.

Soroptimist International urges Governments, civil society, the private sector and other relevant partners to:

- Recognize the increasingly important role of women as the primary producers and purchasers of food, and the heretofore lack of adequate protection and support of their rights.
- By the year 2022, implement domestic legislation and policies that will ensure the full realization of the commitments made in Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration, including the establishment and funding of appropriate audit mechanisms to ensure accountability and transparency.
- Ensure that actions taken to empower rural women are systems-based and horizontal, rather than project-based and vertical.
- End any and all approaches, activities or policies that promulgate the victim/saviour dichotomy and ensure meaningful, respectful and human rights-based approaches to empowerment for rural women and girls.
- Recognize that macroeconomic policies originating from an antiquated and inherently patriarchal hierarchy tend to discriminate against or ignore the gender-specific needs of women and girls. Development and implementation of appropriate microeconomic policies and programmes, in consultation with those affected, must be acted upon to ensure the protection and the realization of the human rights of rural women and girls.
- Implement with urgency policies and programmes that provide rural women and girls with security in the following areas: financial security, employment security, land security, food security, freedom from violence, secure access to education and training, and a secure place in decision-making forums.
- Encourage more female leadership in international organizations pertaining to food and agriculture through mentoring opportunities and training. The Soroptimist International representative to FAO noted with concern that there were no female candidates this year for the Director General elections. Soroptimist International notes with appreciation that the current Executive Director of the World Food Programme is a woman.

Soroptimist International recalls the following relevant recommendations made to the Commission at its fifty-fifth session, placed in the context of the priority theme of the fifty-sixth session:

- Ensure that policies and programmes take a life-course approach to education and employment for rural women and girls, recognizing and understanding that access to learning is a human right at all ages and that women and girls living in rural areas have different needs at different times in their lives.
- Improve and prioritize appropriately disaggregated and internationally comparable data collection, encompassing process and outcome indicators, which shift away from purely economic factors, such as gross domestic product, to holistically examine development. A Soroptimist representative in Geneva noted, after the 2011 Economic and Social Council annual meeting, that there is growing criticism of the focus on the Group of 20, which is not a United Nations-based organization, nor does it address issues outside of finance.
- Work with local partners to improve facilities so that women and girls living in rural areas are afforded education that is accessible, acceptable, available and of good quality; this includes gender-appropriate and -sensitive sanitation facilities, safe environments, dormitories for girls and other aspects, as required.
- Take a human rights-based approach to sustainable development, bringing particular attention and focus to the participation of women and girls in decision-making and policy-setting in a broad range of settings, including both the public and private spheres.
- Ensure that traditionally female-dominated work in agriculture, farming and food production is not undervalued or restricted to informal economies.
- Approach sex- or gender-based quotas with careful planning and ensure that rural women, from an early age, are fully equipped with all of the knowledge and skills necessary to take on leadership roles for which there may be allocations or other similar mechanisms. Otherwise, we are creating a system that inadvertently sets rural women up to fail, reinforcing sexist perspectives.

Women's Major Stakeholder Group recommendations for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20):

- Commit to gender-sensitive development of binding international and national measures for both sustainable and equitable economies and governance of sustainable development.
- Commit to targets and indicators for women's involvement.
- Include gender equality in the sustainable development goals.
- Address the following emerging issues:
  - Food security and food sovereignty
  - Women's land rights and ownership tenure, and prevention of land-grabbing
  - Privatization and commodification of commons

- Clean renewable energies
- Women and migration
- Water burdens for women
- Health risks to women and girls posed by new technologies and development.